

DISPENSATIONALISM (4)

QUESTION #2 – Is the concept of dispensationalism a new concept to studying the Bible?

There are some who attack the concept of dispensationalism by saying it is some new way to look at the Bible that did not exist in past times. In fact, some argue that this approach to the Bible did not begin until the late 1800's with J. N. Darby and C. I. Scofield. It is true J. N. Darby (1800-1882) was one of the first teachers to present a systematic analysis of dispensationalism, but he was certainly not the first to recognize it and teach it.

The truth is, dispensationalism is certainly not a new study, but it has been a neglected study. It was not a developed study in the early days, but it was recognized. In times past, dispensationalism was an important part of doctrine for those who wanted to understand the Bible. In fact, Arnold D. Ehlert, in his book, *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism*, shows that dispensationalism “has a history almost as old as the church itself.”

Justin Martyr (A.D. 110-165), in his Dialogue with Trypho, recognized several different economies in the Old Testament. For example, he said that prior to circumcision and the law, one could please God without circumcision and without the law. He broke time down as time before Abraham, time after Abraham, time before Moses, time after Moses. Time before Christ and time after Christ. Clearly that is dispensationalism.

Irenaeus (A.D. 130-200) said there were four different dispensations in human history, three in the Old Testament: 1) Adam to Noah, 2) Noah to Moses, 3) Moses to Christ and the Gospel and 4) Christ and the Gospel until eternity. He reasoned there are four zones in the world and four living creatures in Revelation 4:8, which indicates four dispensations.

Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-220) said there were four dispensations: Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamitic and Mosaic.

Tertullian (A.D. 150-225) said there were five dispensations: 1) Adam to Noah; 2) Noah to Abraham; 3) Abraham to Moses; 4) Moses to Christ; 5) Christ to Millennium and Eternity.

Augustine (A.D. 354-430) said, “distinguish the times, and the Scripture is in harmony with itself.” He taught there was a former dispensation when sacrifices were offered and a latter dispensation when sacrifices were no longer acceptable to offer. He said that God has “employed several distinct ways of working in the world as He executes His plan for history” (Renald E. Showers, *There is a Difference*, p. 27).

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), referred to the importance of understanding dispensationalism when he referred to the “two dispensations of Moses and Christ” (*Edwards Works*, Vol. 1, p. 100). In fact, he actually believed in many different dispensations. He wrote a 790 page book called “*A Complete History or Survey of all the Dispensations.*”

DISPENSATIONALISM (5)

Dr. Timothy Dwight, the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, the son of the third daughter of Jonathan Edwards, listed a series of lectures in his theology, as President of Yale University in the 1800's, called, "*System of Dispensations*," which proves that clearly he had some grasp of Dispensationalism.

J. N. Darby (A.D. 1800-1882) played a very important role in developing Dispensational theology. He believed in seven different dispensations: 1) Paradise to flood; 2) Noah; 3) Abraham; 4) Israel; 5) Gentiles; 6) The Spirit; 7) The Millennium.

C. I. Scofield (A.D. 1843-1921) believed in seven different dispensations:

- 1) Man Innocent (from creation to expulsion from Eden).
- 2) Man under Conscience (from Eden to the Flood).
- 3) Man in Authority over the Earth (from Noah to Abraham).
- 4) Man under Promise (from Abraham to Moses).
- 5) Man under Law (from Moses to Christ).
- 6) Man under Grace (From death of Christ to the Rapture).
- 7) Man under Personal reign of Christ (millennial reign).

Certainly Dr. Scofield embraced dispensationalism and his Scofield study Bible was one that taught it, but Scofield just followed in a path of serious Bible interpreters. However, C. I. Scofield was the one who did produce the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909.

Dr. Scofield had been taught how to rightly interpret Scripture from a famous Presbyterian pastor and Bible teacher, Dr. James Brookes. Scofield produced reference notes after years of careful systematic study of the Bible and after months of intense study of libraries at leading Universities in Europe.

Two facts about the Scofield Reference Bible are important to note:

- 1) It was the first publication of Oxford University Press in New York to sell 1 million copies.
- 2) Dr. Scofield was elected to membership in the most influential Academic European society. Obviously God did bless Dr. Scofield and the Reference Bible.

We certainly may conclude from this that dispensationalism is not a new study; but it clearly has been a neglected study.

QUESTION #3 – How important is dispensationalism to interpreting the Bible?

Dispensationalism is the key to rightly dividing the Word of God. Without it one may end up doing insane things and use the Bible as a basis for those insane things.

For example, a few years ago a pastor of a church led his congregation to a beach waiting for God to part the sea so they could walk to the Promised Land. He got the idea from the book of Exodus. Had any in his congregation known dispensationalism, they could have been spared the humiliation of the world laughing at them.

DISPENSATIONALISM (6)

There is an entire cult built on the number 144,000 that comes from Revelation 7 and 14. They go door-to-door telling people they can be part of the 144,000, not having a clue as to the actual time setting of those verses.

Just a few weeks ago a pastor in Africa led his congregation to a river where he said he would walk on water. He walked out in the water and was eaten by an alligator in front of his congregation.

Unless one understands dispensationalism, a text like Matthew 10:5-6 could be taken to mean that we are never to take the Gospel to any Gentile but only to the lost sheep of Israel and that only the eleven apostles are to take the Gospel to the nations (Matt. 28:16,19). Dispensationalism is critical for properly interpreting Scripture.

QUESTION #4 – What is the definition of dispensationalism?

This to me is the key question and the key problem. This is the very reason why there is a variance in the numbers of dispensations. **Before we can figure out how many dispensations actually exist, we must come up with a precise definition of what dispensationalism actually is.** Herein is the major problem. There have been so many definitions applied to the concept of dispensationalism that makes it difficult to precisely determine what a dispensation is and how many dispensations there actually are.

1. The 1926 Edition of the *Webster's New International Dictionary* defines it as a system of rules and principles and promises that are ordained and administered in some scheme or economy. God is the dispensator who sets forth the management rules and principles in the economy (p. 643).
2. The 1933 Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary defines dispensation as being “a religious order or system conceived as divinely instituted, or as a state in a progressive revelation expressly adapted to the needs of a particular nation or period of time...”.
3. C. I. Scofield defines dispensation as follows: “A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect to obedience to some specific revelation to the will of God” (*The Scofield Study Bible*, NASV, p. 4).
4. Merrill Unger says, “A dispensation is an era of time during which man is tested in respect to obedience to some definite revelation of God’s will” (*Ungers Bible Dictionary*, p. 269).
5. Charles Ryrie says dispensationalism “views the world as a household run by God. In His household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these economies are the dispensations” (*Dispensationalism*, p. 29).